

Kids, dollars declining at local little leagues . . .

By Daniel Tedford, Staff Writer

Enrollment and sponsorship dollars at little leagues across the San Gabriel Valley and Whittier are suffering as families and businesses cut back on spending during the recession.

Knowing that times are tough, Whittier Girl's Softball has taken extra measures to ensure enrollment stays the same.

T-ball prices have been reduced from \$125 to \$75, more fundraising has been added, and the league is trying to bring in people like Olympic Gold Medalist Jennie Finch to market the league, said Whittier Girl's Softball President Alberto Arteaga.

"(Sponsorships) have been one of our concerns," Arteaga said. "To ensure we keep sponsorships strong, we are going through extra efforts."

Arteaga's enrollment has
Coach Fred Aparicio works with kids during the Pacific Coast League little league registration and tryouts at Palm View Park on Saturday January 31, 2009 in West Covina. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Keith Birmingham)
remained steady, but some aren't as fortunate.

Pacific Coast Little League in West Covina and Covina American Little League have seen enough enrollment declines so severe the pair are working on a deal to schedule interleague play this year.

"It doesn't appear we are going to make our normal amounts," said Pacific Coast Vice President Steve Bennett.

The decline in enrollment could be attributed to two different areas, according to USC expert in sports business David Carter.

"Youth sports across the board are not inexpensive anymore, whether you are signing up or purchasing equipment. People are taking a good, long look at it these days," Carter said. "On the other hand, you may be seeing that those who are really serious about sports these days are playing club sports. (Little League) is not the only game in town anymore." It wouldn't be fair to blame all enrollment problems on the economy, Carter said. While it may play a role, Carter half-expected more people to turn to youth sports during tough



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times as a distraction.

"What a great break from the daily grind," Carter said.

Ball Haaker, of Haaker Equipment Company based in La Verne, has served on various boards in the late 1980s and 90s as his children played youth sports. From Alta Loma to Rancho Cucamonga to Etiwanda to West Covina, Haaker has seen his share of youth sports.

Haaker said the impact of this recession is "unprecedented."

"The family with a stressed budget will have to make decisions to make cuts when necessary and certain recreational activities such as little league, AYSO ... are eliminated," Haaker said. "Unfortunately, once the redirection away from a sports like baseball, soccer, dance, or music for that matter, occurs, it is very hard for a youngster to get motivated to get back into the activity."

For those who are having trouble paying for youth sports, West Covina and other cities have youth assistance programs that help families pay for registration. Some cities have seen an increase in its use this year.

Still, more people should be encouraged to use it during tough times, but it is a difficult spot to approach families about their financial hardships, Bennett said.

In order to make up for the lost revenue, Bennett hopes he can get more local sponsors involved to supplement the league's funds.

D.J. Caruso, normally known for directing movies like "Distrubia," "The Saltan Sea" and "Eagle Eye," also is the board president at Pasadena Southwestern Little League.

Caruso has five kids and has been involved in the league for sometime. This year, while in-between movies, they asked him to be president.

The league's enrollment is where it should be, but sponsorships are down 25 to 28 percent, Caruso said.

"People who wanted to donate to the league cut it in half or did a little less," Caruso said.

The league depends on sponsorship money as registration fees for each child rarely cover the cost per child, Caruso said. With the decline in sponsorship funds, the league will miss out on some upgrades.

"We always manage to pay our bills," Caruso said. "But certain equipment desires or dreams we have to put off and hope we get more money next year."

